

## CYRUS AND SUSA

BY  
Matt WATERS

Whatever Cyrus the Great's ethnicity and his regal pretensions, his use of the titular "king of Anshan"<sup>1</sup> reflected his initial rule of a historically Elamite territory over what one may assume was a significant number of ethnically Elamite individuals, even if Persian-Elamite acculturation was well-advanced by the mid-sixth century. If "Elam" as a geographic and political term should be understood to refer to Susiana during this period,<sup>2</sup> c. 640-550, it stands to reason to be interested in Cyrus' relations with his Elamite neighbors in Susiana and his ultimate conquest of them.

It is clear that by the mid-seventh century "Elam," as the Assyrians described it, no longer existed as a unified entity. Several kings bearing Elamite names are attested in Neo-Elamite texts from c. 640-550. In light of the uncertainties in dating many Neo-Elamite rulers (whose royal inscriptions are not easily assigned chronologically), their number varies by treatment and methodology. Neo-Elamite royal inscriptions lack external, chronological anchors, and their internal markers are inconsistent at best.<sup>3</sup> A sampling of Neo-Elamite rulers dated to the later seventh and early sixth centuries includes Šutur-Nahhunte, son of Indada ; (the same ?) Šutur-Nahhunte, father of Huban-kitin ; the *kutur* Hanni ; Appalaya, king of the Zarians ; Huban-šuturuk (of Gisat ?) ; Atta-hamiti-Inshushinak ; and Ummanunu. There is little indication of the places, extent, or chronology of their rules, even if the texts mentioning them are from a secure spot.<sup>4</sup> It is currently impossible to trace Cyrus the Great's conquests of his neighbors or to posit confidently whom, if anyone, Cyrus' predecessors may have already conquered or in what sequence. That Cyrus' predecessors made such conquests ought to be considered a possibility, though with all appropriate qualifiers in light of the limited data.

Even if it is assumed that Elam – in this context roughly synonymous with Susiana – fell with or before the city of Susa itself, a search for even an approximate date remains in the realm of speculation. The return of gods from Babylon to a number of places after Cyrus'

1. This titulary is found in the Ur brick (line 1) and the Cyrus Cylinder (line 12) ; see H. Schaudig, *Die Inschriften Nabonids von Babylon und Kyros' des Großen*, AOAT 256 (Münster, 2001), 549 and 552. Abbreviations herein follow CAD.

2. Note F. Vallat's discussion in *Les noms géographiques des sources suso-élamites*, Répertoire Géographique des Textes Cunéiformes 11 (Wiesbaden, 1993), cviii-cx and cxxxvii-cxliii.

3. See M. Stolper, "Mālamîr. B. Philologisch," *RIA* 7 (1988), 279.

4. For discussion of these rulers and the concomitant problems, compare F. Vallat, "Nouvelle analyse des inscriptions néo-élamites," in *Collectanea Orientalia. Histoire, Arts de l'espace et industrie de la terre : Etudes offertes en hommage à Agnès Spycket*, ed. H. Gasche and B. Hrouda (Neuchâtel, 1996), 385-95 ; D. T. Potts, *The Archaeology of Elam : Formation and Transformation of an Ancient Iranian State* (Cambridge, 1999), 288-306 ; M. W. Waters, *A Survey of Neo-Elamite History*, SAAS XII (Helsinki, 2000), Chapter 7 ; W. F. M. Henkelman, "Defining Neo-Elamite History," *BiOr* LX 3/4 (2003), 251-263 ; and J. Tavernier, "Some Thoughts on Neo-Elamite Chronology," *ARTA* 2004.003.

conquest of that city has been put forward as evidence that Susa was conquered just before (perhaps even on the way to) Babylonia. Such an assessment is untenable when based, as it usually is, on the oblique testimony of the Cyrus Cylinder.<sup>5</sup> The relevant passage in the Cyrus Cylinder (lines 30-32) runs : “From [Babylon ?] up to Ashur and Susa, Akkad, Eshnunna, Zabban, Meturnu, Der to the border of the Gutî, the shrines on the other side of the Tigris that were erected long ago, the gods who dwelt in their residences I returned to their places and I caused them to take up residence forever.”

The phrase in question – *māḥāz[a ebe]rti*<sup>1D</sup> IDIGNA *ša ištu pānama nadû* (“the shrines on the other side of the Tigris that were erected long ago” ; line 31) – is ambiguous. Its sense is primarily dependent upon translation of the verb *nadû* and the adverbial phrase *ištu pānama*, either “(from) long ago” or “for a long time.”<sup>6</sup> The verb *nadû* in the stative here may have either the sense of “abandoned” or of “established,” with a significant difference in nuance. The adverbial phrase *ištu pānama* is translated according to the sense of the verb in this passage. Commentators are divided, as may be seen from the following.

A. Oppenheim : “...the sanctuaries of which have been ruins for a long time...”

A. K. Grayson : “...cult-centres across the Tigris, which were founded in ancient times...”

P.-R. Berger : “...die Kultstätt[ten jense]its des Tigris, deren Wohnstatt seit früher(er Zeit) aufgegeben war...”

W. Eilers : “...aux villes [au-delà] du Tigre, dont la demeure est depuis toujours fondée...”

P. Lecoq : “...aux villes [au-delà] du Tigre, dont les fondations avaient été depuis longtemps abandonnées...”

H. Schaudig : “...die Kultstäd[te jen]seits des Tigris, deren Wohnung(en) seit früher darniederlagen...”

M. Brosius (after Berger) : “the cult places on the other side of the Tigris, whose sanctuaries had been deserted a long time ago...”

P. Michalowski : “...these sanctuaries on the other side of the Tigris, sanctuaries founded in ancient times...”<sup>7</sup>

The understanding of the passage is also of consequence in determining if Cyrus was engaging in further propaganda against Nabonidus, was using a pious formula, or both. Each translation carries an implication for either assessment, but the implications are immaterial to the specific question at-hand. The return of the captured gods reveals nothing about the dates of Cyrus’ or his Babylonian predecessors’ conquests of the regions listed. What the Cyrus Cylinder passage indicates is that, after having taken Babylon, Cyrus was in possession of these deities to return them, regardless of whether the shrines had been built long ago (on my interpretation) or had been abandoned for a long time. As a counter-example, consider Ashurbanipal’s return of Nanaya to Uruk after the sack of Susa. Though the Elamites held this statue for 1635 years, according to Ashurbanipal, no one would posit Elamite control over Uruk for that length of time. Faced with the Persian threat, Nabonidus brought several gods to

5. See references in note 10 below.

6. CAD P, 77 cites this passage but does not translate it.

7. For the transliteration, see Schaudig, *Inscripfen*, pp. 551-54. For the translations : Oppenheim, *ANET*, pp. 315-16 ; Grayson, *Papyrus and Tablet*, ed. A. K. Grayson and D. Redford (Prentice Hall, 1973), 125 ; Berger, “Der Kyros-Zylinder mit dem Zusatzfragment BIN II Nr. 32 und die akkadischen Personennamen im Danielbuch”, *ZA* 64 (1974-75), 199 ; Eilers, “Le texte cunéiforme du cylindre de Cyrus,” *Acta Iranica* 2 (1974), 34 (translated into French by Jacques Duchesne-Guillemin) ; Lecoq, *Les inscriptions de la Perse achéménide* (Paris, 1997), 184 ; Schaudig, *Inscripfen*, 556 ; Brosius, *The Persian Empire from Cyrus II to Artaxerxes I* (London, 2002), 11 ; Michalowski in *The Ancient Near East : Historical Sources in Translation*, ed. M. Chavalas (Malden, MA, 2006), 429. CAD N/1, 83 meaning 2b1’, where this passage is cited but not translated, connotes the sense of “established” (i.e., to lay a foundation), which I follow herein.

Babylon for their protection and to help ensure the loyalty of their home cities.<sup>8</sup> Even if they were sent to Babylon willingly, Cyrus claimed otherwise to bolster his prestige with their return. It is also possible that some of the gods in question had been in Babylon for some time before Nabonidus' reign.

Cyrus' conquests of Media, Lydia, and Babylonia are all celebrated in various sources, though only the conquest of Babylon may be precisely dated to 539. Testimony about Cyrus and Susa in classical authors is minimal. According to Strabo (15.3.2), Cyrus established Susa as a capital after the conquest of Media (i.e., by 550/549). This testimony may be interpreted in a number of ways, and one option is simply to reject it as anachronistic. The same applies to Herodotus 1.88, which relays that, when Cyrus marched against Babylonia, Cyrus took with him water from the Choaspes.<sup>9</sup> From this it has been adduced that Susa must have been in Cyrus' possession before he marched against Babylonia.<sup>10</sup> These two testimonies are not irreconcilable, as both indicate that Cyrus held Susa (and by extension, the geographically nebulous "Elam") before he conquered Babylonia, though Herodotus gives no indication of the date of Susa's conquest.

There is no evidence beyond Strabo that Cyrus made Susa an imperial capital,<sup>11</sup> let alone that he did so right after the conquest of Media. Strabo's and Herodotus' testimonies fit a general hypothesis that Cyrus had conquered Susa before his Babylonian campaign, a hypothesis that would one would be hard-pressed to contradict even without any evidence at all. Simply on the grounds of historical prospect, as interpreted here, I have difficulty envisioning Cyrus on the path of conquest in northern Iran and Anatolia without his immediate neighbor (what came to be a formal and prominent – in Darius I's *dahyu* lists at least – province) to the north unconquered.<sup>12</sup> That the region was politically fragmented and probably unstable in the preceding roughly one hundred years makes it unlikely that Cyrus would have allowed it to roil in his backyard, while he was off in distant lands. It also seems unlikely that possession of Susa and Elam became strategically viable or politically desirable only just before Cyrus' conquest of Babylon. It is my assumption that Susa and Elam, however the latter is to be defined in this

8. For the Ashurbanipal passage, R. Borger, *Beiträge zum Inschriftenwerk Ashurbanipals* (Wiesbaden, 1996), 57-58 A vi 107-124. For the Nabonidus episode, see P. Beaulieu's discussion (with references), "An Episode in the Fall of Babylon to the Persians," *JNES* 52 (1993), 241-61, especially 242-43 and 257.

9. For identification of this river and the confusion in the modern scholarship, see Daniel T. Potts, "Elamite Ūla, Akkadian Ulaya, and Greek Choaspes: A Solution to the Eulaios Problem," *Bulletin of the Asia Institute* 13 (1999), 27-44 and "Neo-Elamite Problems," *Iranica Antiqua* XL (2005), 165-70.

10. On the date of Cyrus' conquest of Susa, compare R. Zadok, "On the Connections between Iran and Babylonia in the Sixth Century B.C.," *Iran* 14 (1976), 61-62, who argues for Cyrus' conquest of Susa in 539 as a part of the Neo-Babylonian Empire; M. W. Stolper, "Political History," 55 in E. Carter and M. Stolper, *Elam: Surveys of Political History and Archaeology* (California, 1984), who notes that Cyrus' conquest of Susa and Khuzistan is not documented but "the event probably took place shortly before his conquest of Babylon"; A. Kuhrt, *The Ancient Near East c. 3000-330 BC*, Volume II (London, 1995), 657: "As we have no evidence for Babylonian rule of Susa in the reign of Nabonidus (555-539), we should probably date the Persian takeover to Cyrus II's reign, and before 539. More precision is, unfortunately, impossible. It is not impossible that the fall of Susa predates Cyrus' war against the Medes (550) and that it led to hostility between Babylonia and Persia"; Henkelman, "Defining Neo-Elamite History," 262; and J. Tavernier, "Some Thoughts on Neo-Elamite Chronology," 27. Note also P. Briant, "L'eau du Grand Roi," in *Drinking in Ancient Societies: History and Culture of Drinks in the Ancient Near East*, ed. L. Milano (Padua, 1994), 55 n. 20 and *From Cyrus to Alexander: A History of the Persian Empire* (hereafter, *HPE*), translated by P. Daniels (Winona Lake, IN, 2002), 884.

11. There appears to have been no large-scale works at Susa by the Persians before Darius. See P. de Miroschedji, "Observations dans les couches néo-élamites au nord-ouest du tell de la Ville Royale à Suse," *DAFI* 12 (1981), 150 (see also Tableau 2 on p. 40) and "Notes sur la glyptique de la fin de l'Élam," *RA* 76 (1982), 60 and 62 n. 50. Note also Briant, *HPE*, 85.

12. Note the discussion by Potts, *Archaeology of Elam*, 306-07.

period, fell to Cyrus early – probably during an initial part of Cyrus’ expansion (or possibly even to his predecessors) – but this cannot be proven. The question remains open.

### ***ABSTRACT***

The date of Cyrus’ conquest of Susa remains in the realm of conjecture. Many modern commentators date the conquest in conjunction with Cyrus’ conquest of Babylon (539 BC), based on the testimony of the Cyrus Cylinder, lines 30-32. That passage of the Cylinder is open both to linguistic and to historical interpretation. Regardless of interpretation, it offers no indication in what year Cyrus conquered Susa, only that he did so sometime before the conquest of Babylon.

### ***RÉSUMÉ***

La date de la conquête de Suse par Cyrus reste matière à conjecture. De nombreux commentateurs modernes datent cette conquête simultanément à la conquête de Babylone par Cyrus (539 av. J.-C.), sur la base du témoignage de son cylindre, lignes 30-32. Ce passage est sujet à des interprétations à la fois linguistiques et historiques. Quoi qu’il en soit, il n’offre aucune indication sur l’année de la conquête de Suse par Cyrus, si ce n’est qu’elle eut lieu avant la conquête de Babylone.

Department of History, UW-Eau Claire  
Eau Claire, WI, 54702, USA